

UNREASONED LIFE
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Harnack concluded that it was a non-professional job. A distinguished historian and theologian of the last century, Adolf Harnack wrote a monumental work, The History of Dogma, in which he concluded that the most effective missionaries were always non-professionals but rather ordinary people trying to live like Christians in a pagan world. It is a conclusion widely shared. A British scholar, T.W. Manson wrote:

"The Christianity that conquered the Roman Empire was not an affair of brilliant preachers addressing packed congregations. We have nothing much in the way of brilliant preachers for the first 300 years of the church's life...before Christianity had made its way right through the empire, end to end. It was done by servants, workers, shopkeepers, teaching Christ through their work." (See Hans Ruedi-Weber, Salty Christians, p.26).

We know the truth of those conclusions. We know that the only religion worth anything at all has to do with the common life. What is it about Christianity that compels your faith? As I have thought about it, I see now that the Christianity that continues to claim me is appropriated through people for whom the Gospel of Jesus Christ has made life more vivid, more intense, more committed, more full of zest, flavor, more lively.

Sometimes the testimony has been terribly costly. Sometimes it has taken shape as the deep love and courage and commitment stimulated by Jesus Christ came into focus in an intensely public manner: like the military chaplains, whose strong love enabled them to give away life jackets, and arms linked together, to die that four others might live, three Christians and a Jew. There's something awful and beautiful and salty and compelling to me about that. Or the gentle pacifist theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer who wanted to be a pastor and teach a little theology and read and write, but whose commitment to Jesus Christ and his utter revulsion by Nazism, drew him into a conspiracy to assassinate Adolf Hitler. Or Dr. Martin Luther King, whose academic credentials were real, and who easily would have been a distinguished theologian in a major university, but whose commitment to Jesus Christ drew him into a radical confrontation with the principalities and powers of our culture.

Tutu & Boesak / Ben Wuer / Terry Wachs

The Christianity that claims me is appropriated through lives of radical, unambiguous involvement in the life of the world. Sometimes that spells martyrdom, but not always. Sometimes it takes the form of an uncompromising love for the world, a deep embracing and affirming of life - life made forever different by Jesus Christ. A college professor, for instance, who introduced me to Soren Kierkegaard, and who stopped by the dorm to talk because he couldn't smoke cigars during meetings of the Campus Christian Fellowship and whose love for God was rivaled only by his unending devotion to the Chicago Cubs. Somewhere along the line I had simply assumed that Christians were afraid to think, didn't care about things like baseball and took a very dim view of pleasures of the flesh. But here was a man who loved the Lord and Danish philosophy and a well-turned double play and a good cigar. It was a conversion experience for me. Or Joseph Sittler, professor of the University Emeritus, at Chicago, distinguished theologian who thinks and writes majestically, who also loves poetry and plays the French Horn. Sittler caught me as a student, frankly, because his faith seemed to make him more human, more imaginative, more salty, more an unabashed lover of life. In honor of his 75th birthday Fortress Press has published a little volume of his essays under the title, "Grace Notes and Other Fragments". In one of them, "Polish Sausage, St. Augustine and the Moral Life", Sittler describes the white vending truck that parked each noon in front of the Administration Building at the University of Chicago. The speciality was Polish Sausage which he describes with enthusiasm and eloquence..."Rich, juicy, odorous, garlic-laden, hot and smelling with all the herb-subtlety of a thousand years of Polish Sausage culture." Their effect, he wrote, was to "bring tears to the eyes,

a clutch at the throat, and clarification to the mind." The line of people waiting for a sausage was no respecter of station or academic rank; art historians, nuclear physicists, mingled with construction workers and truck drivers. One day Sittler met a friend in line. From the encounter he builds an interesting moral argument. But for my purpose this morning listen to his description:

"I was astonished to see him - and said so: 'Dr. Platz, what are you doing here? You are a pathologist: you know very well that you ought not to eat one of these violent things! I am only a theologian and I don't know any better. But you are a doctor - a pathologist - and you have professionally examined the catastrophic effect upon the stomach of these explosive, corrosive tissue-eroding sausages!...' Charles Platz fixed me with a cool gaze. 'Yes,' he said, 'you are quite right. But these things are very good, aren't they?'" (p.74-75).

Christian faith is made winsome when it can be seen in lives that are more human because of it: lives that are more alive, more intense, more committed. That, I have a growing hunch, was part of Jesus' personal mystique, His obvious strong appeal. He was lively. He was not grim, boring. His message was life-affirming; He generated excitement wherever He went, controversy, heated discussions. People got steamed-up about Him and what He was saying. It was interesting whenever He was around. He imparted all of that to His followers. In fact, one time He said to them, "You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is good for nothing except to be thrown out and trodden under foot."

As far as I know "salt of the earth" was not a common idiom. It is part of our language; it means "good, solid, stable, hard-working people". But in all likelihood the disciples had never heard it before Jesus used it to describe them. The setting is the Sermon on the Mount. The Beatitudes precede this saying. "Blessed - or better yet - how happy are the poor, the meek, the hungry, the peacemakers, the persecuted." I've always felt that the only honest initial reaction to the Beatitudes had to have been: "You gotta be kidding!" Poor people aren't happy. There's nothing blessed about being hungry and thirsty. Nice guys finish last, then and now. Or, as someone told me last night after a particularly intense High School basketball game with a great deal of emotional investment, "People who learn how to lose graciously usually do." You have to imagine the twelve, hearing those radical statements of His for the first time. I've always imagined them consoling themselves by thinking: "He means it symbolically; He really doesn't mean for us to be persecuted...or maybe He means that we can retire to a desert monastery and there be meek, humble, poor and persecuted to our heart's content." I've always imagined the disciples thinking like that because that's how we think. But Jesus forever closed the door on that possibility..."You are the salt of the earth."

They knew what it meant. It was a vivid metaphor. Salt was quite valuable and had a number of important uses. It was a necessary preservative and purifier. It was used liturgically in temple sacrifices. It was a major item of international trade. But the most interesting quality of salt, the quality about which we most care, the quality that made it a valuable luxury - was as seasoning. Salt makes bland food tasty. It enhances, draws out and amplifies flavor. It adds vitality and zest.

The first and basic point to be understood about this remarkable little metaphor is that Christianity must be applied to the world or it is worthless. Following Jesus is connected somehow with all the rest of life or it is not authentic. That, by the way, is not at all a moot point. In fact, there is no more important issue, nor more controversial matter, than the relationship of faith to the rest of human life.

Somehow, somewhere along the line, we have convinced ourselves that life may be divided into departments: economic department, political department, social, family, recreation, and, of course, religious department. Sometimes the system is infinitely

simpler and focuses on just two compartments: secular and sacred, religion and all the rest of life. That's a Greek legacy, by the way. What it does, essentially, is allow us to wall religion off from life: personal religion and corporate religion. When we say, for instance, that religion and politics don't mix, what we ordinarily mean is that there is a wall between my religious and political compartments. The people who constructed and operated Auschwitz believed very firmly in that division. They often said, "religion and politics don't mix."

The author of an article on Ulster's children in a recent Atlantic Monthly asked a ten year old Belfast boy to draw a picture of the "troubles". "He drew for me a vicious battle scene. He posed the Irish against the British, and declared his Church, however imposingly drawn, essentially off-limits, hence irrelevant..." (December, 1989, Atlantic Monthly, p.35).

We may not agree with one another on the matter of Capital Punishment or any one of a number of complex questions. May we have the grace and the courage to agree to disagree. But let us not ever masquerade political partisanship that has been offended by saying "religion and politics don't mix". The religion that does not mix with politics is like salt that has lost its saltiness. It is good for nothing. Comfortable perhaps, bland almost certainly, and irrelevant. We are - Jesus said - the salt of the earth.

new section here -

We are salt as a church, a corporate entity, a conglomerate of folk who together wish to follow Jesus Christ. But we are also individuals and we are, individually, salt of the earth as well. Salt acts on its environment. Salt changes whatever it touches: salt melts, corrodes, purifies, preserves, and flavors whatever it touches. So Christians, dispersed throughout society, are called to make their individual witness. Not many people feel that we are getting the job done, individually or corporately. It is not, I conclude, a failure of nerve, or strength, or will, or ability. It is primarily a theological failure. Hans Ruedi-Weber helped me to see that in this paragraph: "The church is failing to accomplish its primary task of penetrating and transforming the world. One reason is that too few Christians acknowledge that Christ, the Lord of the Church, is also the Lord of the world..." (Op.cit., p.9).

Jesus intended that His disciples would follow Him in the context of their lives, not just in the Temple, or during their secret celebrations of the Lord's Supper, certainly not by withdrawing into a hidden religious community. He anticipated Christian fishermen and homemakers and lawyers and tax collectors and soldiers. He intended, I believe, that this dispersal of people in and through the common life would not only change the common life - as salt does - but also that it would add flavor, zest, liveliness, vitality. That, too - that, primarily perhaps, is the burden and the privilege of following Him today.

How sad that the reverse seems always nearer the truth. We are to bring flavor to life, but, too frequently, we have made the Gospel boring. If you want to get depressed turn in the Hymnal to the section entitled "The Life in Christ"...

Come unto me, ye weary

Jesus calls us; o'er the tumult of our life's wild restless sea

Just as I am, poor, wretched, blind

Jesus Lover of my soul, let me to thy bosom fly

Rock of Ages, cleft for me, let me hide myself in thee

Many of you love these hymns, I do too. They represent one of the meanings of the Gospel. They are part of the Good News. But there are no others in the Hymnal. Reading through the section as a representation of Christian life it is impossible not to conclude that our calling is to follow Jesus away from the life most people choose to live most of the time. Given the overwhelming incidence of hiding, fleeing, ducking, cowering, and turning away, it appears that life is fundamentally evil, to be avoided and escaped, and that Christianity is every bit as other-worldly as the latter day adherents keep insisting. It's almost as if He didn't say, "You are the salt of the earth."

God doesn't despise the world. He doesn't call people out of or away from the world. The Old Testament is set in cosmic terms. God chooses a people to redeem all people. Hans Ruedi-Weber puts it nicely: "The world is God's first love, his first fiance." (Op.cit,p.10). To be faithful today, therefore, is not to turn away from God's world and retreat into a private world of prayer and meditation. It is to turn to the world, deliberately; to love its life, to embrace it, to live it deeply and fully. It is to understand that somehow at the heart of it all, to be a Christian is to be fully human; that we are never more faithful than when we are fully human. The Gospel that compels faith is salty. I am claimed by the witness of well seasoned lives.

In an early book Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose experience I cited, commented on the Sermon on the Mount. I looked up what he had to say about Matthew 5:13: "You are the salt of the earth." He wrote in 1937, "The disciples then must not think only of heaven; they have an earthly task as well." (The Cost of Discipleship, 9.104). Then I took from my shelf his Letters and Papers from Prison published after his execution by the Nazis. They are mostly letters to his parents written from his prison cell. I found the one dated July 21, 1944, the day after the attempt to assassinate Hitler failed, an attempt in which he was involved. Bonhoeffer knew he would die, and his letter that day carries special significance...

"During the last year or so I have come to appreciate the 'worldliness' of Christianity as never before. The Christian is not a 'homo religiosus', but a man, pure and simple...I don't mean the shallow this-worldliness of the enlightened, of the busy, the comfortable...It's something much more profound than that, something in which the knowledge of death and resurrection is ever present...I am still discovering up to this very moment that it is only by living completely in this world that one learns to believe. I am glad I have been able to learn it, and I know I could only have done so along the road I have traveled. So I am grateful and content with the past and the present.

"Goodbye. Take care of yourself and don't lose hope - we shall all meet again soon!" (p.225,227).

To His first disciples, His only friends, and to you and me, here, in this place, Jesus said: "You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hid..."

Amen.

God, our Father: it takes courage to love the world as much as You want us to love. Sometimes we get tired of the world; sometimes we want to escape. Lord God, give us heart and strength and faith to flavor our world with Your love: in Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.